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Daniel LaBeau

ON REBECCA BYRKIT

*We have shrilly and with spastic wrists
Erected our own still.
Nobody needs another glass. But.
Including the treacherous angels
Lurching,
(eight:) Everybody will.*
—from “Dream of Knocking: a poem in eight accusations”

THERE IS A CELEBRATION. A party in the desert just beyond our headlights. The pickups have stopped in a ring of Palo Verde trees, fired the barbecue. Dwight Yoakam is cranked on a tape deck. We accelerate to get there, unable to remember if we’ve been invited, what the party’s for, etc. As we slide closer, the party-goers warp, something goes dangerous with their laughter. Maybe this is the post-funeral bash for our best friend. Maybe it’s the fiesta for the Day of the Dead. Either way we still get to dance. People are trying to kiss us. Ghosts hand us beers.

This is Rebecca Byrkit’s moment of creation, a moment when sensation and dread intensify, requiring an astonishing voice to begin speaking. Byrkit’s voice is one of the few with enough nerve to take on the overloaded world without going dead. Instead she matches the moment with an excessive self, a voice full of eroticism, lyrical beauty, and blood.

Michael Palmer talks of shifts in poetry due to the return of impulses repressed by previous avant-garde movements. Byrkit’s voice is a full-blown recovery from the flattened poetic surfaces of recent years, a voice driven by musical pleasures and desires it’s hard to believe were momentarily regarded as obsolete.

It’s one of the liveliest voices to ever step in the arena. It recalls Hart Crane in its syntactic and imagistic density, and Cesar Vallejo in its play-

Zealand by Rebecca Byrkit. SUN/gemini Press, P.O. Box 42170, Tucson, AZ 85733

fulness and energy. But there are no precedents of entry to most of the places Byrkit visits in her debut collection *Zealand*. The title is accurate in describing a book that doesn't merely run on an astounding voice but creates its own country, a desert land governed by alcohol and vision.

Byrkit has a wonderful way with language, bending syntax and allowing charged encounters with its music. The book is laced with attitude: "God? Is my sex your notion of a 'galaxy'?" With comedy: "I know girls who dance in bars and marry, like, firemen. / This man here is so unemployed I could talk to him all night." And of course, with sex: "I recommend the fricative / Of felt pink inch right here on me."

Byrkit's pyrotechnics are a pleasure in themselves, but she moves beyond simple pleasure, guided by a fervor to communicate her world. There is a necessary irreverence, created by the body's struggle to understand the spirit. No one can help. There is no one to please.

What we're given is Byrkit's own Divine Comedy, a travelogue through a world where Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory lie next to each other, like lovers, and traveling to any one sector requires carrying the others with you.

The book is structured to carry us from celebration to great pain and back to celebration. Of course, we're required to transform ourselves on the road. Two events form the emotional steering wheel we grab onto: the suicide of a lover, and the marriage of two friends. Byrkit's handling of these events, especially the former, expands beyond the confessional, allowing our contact with sorrow to include surreal elements and humor.

The opening section "Effluvial Moods," launches Byrkit's journey. "The Only Dance There Is," a collection of one-liners set in a bar, chronicles sexual encounters and works itself into lyrical frenzy:

O, you drunk and fucked-up munificence. O, Unshaven, Midnight,
Kindly lubricate my introduction to the unspeakable ring of chaos
You understand to be your life. You will surely pull the coil
out of my car.
Oh no! He's going to show it to me—
God save the two of us, supernova.

When Byrkit tosses the limits out the window, she comes closest to vision. The book finds its tension, its predicament, by remaining faithful to both a style fueled by extremes and to a real emotional situation, to actual pain. This is not a voice constructed to write great poems with, but one that is necessary for this poet to embody her culture and her life.

The lover's suicide is dealt with in a number of poems in the book's center. Often the tragedy is treated with raw emotion and horror mixed with dark humor and a strange level of perception. "The Funeral" begins painfully directly: "In one poem, he compelled: *foresee my body, Becky—*/ Laid out, robed, like some strangely large Chinese guy." Byrkit allows very different states of mind and emotion to exist simultaneously. An example of this is a stark and moving passage in "The Something Something Something of Desire":

When your good friend moved to Arizona
And shot a gun that was in his mouth on my bed,
I went: Where did he stash that *really* dirty
Tape: BLUE DAMNED NUDES? I had thoughts
You just would not believe.

*I can keep this ball glove if I want.
Now I can sleep with John Cosco.
Now I can drink in the car.*

This replication of real thoughts while trying to process a tragedy is Byrkit's jab at the unspeakable. But she also understands that if we could transmit the unspeakable, it would be too painful for an audience to read. The wit of these lines and of others in the poem is not there to make the truth easy to take, but as a recognition of our limits as humans, it is what makes it possible for us to continue living.

While Byrkit guides us through this sector of experience, her Inferno, she doesn't allow us to be engulfed by pain and horror. She brings along the comedic, and more importantly the erotic: "The suicide / Survivor is sexual, her crotch a runway model, Tatterdemalion, signing autographs." This is a speaker too wounded to care about what's appropriate, too alive to ignore what's real. The effect is Dionysian: a celebration under du-

ress, laughter to confuse dark spirits. This Inferno is superimposed upon beauty. The sacred and the profane are indistinguishable.

The book's second section, "epithalamion: zealand" is a more impressionistic sequence of poems. The subject: "Here we have poets / apparently marrying. / Thus with zeal / We rock." The serial format allows Byrkit more freedom from narrative, more chances for undisturbed beauty.

This series is truly in motion, a journey from Tucson to Flagstaff to attend the wedding. With such close proximity to the suicide in the book and in real time, it's the summer immediately after, it's tempting to read this journey as a ritual quest for renewal. But where Eliot's grail is forever lost, Byrkit finds energy in almost everything. She's in love with the build-up of voices around her. She patches in broadcasts from Country radio DJs and faux statements from celebrities. Most of the energy comes from her own voice, which has an opportunity here to enter into joy. Her handling of sensuality doesn't end with the sexual. Her meditations on food are nearly as thrilling: "Forking kreplach / Viscous over lips; won ton / Of another, and the other is the lover: / Better than the hot froth of wine *en flagrante* / Or the juba danced with lime and sifted weed. Love / Is a good jellied-cow- / Hooves-in-garlic life; / Ornamentally, gastrocharmingly, home."

The juxtaposition of this wedding with the funeral is not a journey from death to life. At all times these worlds are simultaneous. Just as comedy and sex crept into hell, a dark sensibility follows the speaker into this paradise of language. These parallel stirrings are necessary in the speaker's celebration of her time on earth. They give her the need to celebrate.

The sequence hits its climax where the speaker canoes down a river, saying "Never have I longed to learn my life so much." She concludes with a set of instructions that seem aimed at herself:

Swing your heads
from birdsong side
to incredulous pendulum
side.
I guess this place looks
good to us.
I guess we can be part of it.

Settle in the paddle.
Arrive somewhere behind you grinning.
Involve the matter of your future.
Disclose
your skinny digits to the lake.

When Byrkit's music cools down (but trust me, it never will) we'll see what we've been given is a wonderful travelogue to a party that will go on without us. And most importantly, she has given us a glimpse, through a haze of "dancing drunks," of a soul in action.